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ABSTRACT

Beginning readers and proficient readers can be characterized by using research found in professional journal articles and other educational sources. Learning to read requires numerous abilities, several of which are acquired before a child begins school; this time period between birth and when a child begins school is called the "emergent literacy" stage. Reading instruction starts in the "beginning reading" stage, which includes grades K-1. A balanced approach to reading instruction is one that combines the best strategies from the whole language approach and explicit phonics instruction. A writer's workshop is essential to any reading program, since students are intrinsically motivated to read their own writing. A stage of "growing independence" includes grades 2-3 and marks the beginning of a child's venture into becoming a proficient reader. The main characteristic of this stage is children's evolving fluency. The "reading to learn" stage includes grades 4-6 and is marked by the wide application of word-attack and comprehension skills. Readers in the last stage, "abstract reading," employ a complex set of mental strategies that readers need in order to coordinate cues from different information sources, evaluate their progress, and shift between comprehension and word recognition processes. (Contains nine references.) (RS)

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The Progression from Emergent to Proficient Literacy: Beginning Readers and Proficient Readers

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The ability to read is one of the most crucial survival skills a person can possess. Since we live in a society engulfed in text, reading is necessary to make sense of the words that surround us. Furthermore, literacy has become a fundamental stepping stone needed in our society to achieve most levels of economic comfort. In addition, reading fosters learning, in which the resulting benefits are endless. Reading is a complex achievement, which came late in the cultural history of our race. Reading emerges gradually and develops continuously; therefore, the journey a beginning reader must go on to become a proficient reader is complex. The intent of this paper is to characterize beginning readers and proficient readers using research found in professional journal articles and other educational sources.

Learning to read requires numerous abilities, several of which are acquired before a child begins school; this time period between birth and when a child begins school is called the "Emergent Literacy" stage (Gunning, 1996). In this stage, the first signs of abilities and knowledge with regard to written language appear (Saint-Laurent, Giasson & Couture, 1997). Children who have had many experiences with written language tend to find it easier to learn to read in school (Saint-Laurent, Giasson & Couture, 1997). For example, frequent contact with written language allows children to develop positive attitudes towards reading and to acquire knowledge about behaviors that support the development of reading and writing. Some of these behaviors include knowing the differences between written and oral language, understanding reading direction (e.g. reading from left to right), understanding what letters, words, sentences, and titles are, knowing the different uses of written language, searching for a text's meaning, and recognizing words. Evidence supports that these behaviors precede and develop into conventional literacy (Saint-Laurent, Giasson & Couture, 1997). Therefore, parents can help build a strong foundation for reading instruction within their child by creating a print-rich

environment that includes reading role models, opportunities to explore written material, and social interactions with adults while reading books (Saint-Laurent, Giasson & Couture, 1997).

Reading instruction starts in the "Beginning Reading" stage, which includes grades K-1 (Gunning, 1996). The field of reading has been embroiled in a controversy surrounding the superiority of either a phonetic approach or a whole-word approach to early reading instruction. Advocates of phonics believe children should learn to detect the sounds that make up words, while advocates of whole language embrace whole words and stories and believe the most important skill to develop in children is the ability to anticipate an upcoming word (Collins, 1997). A counter-revolution was instigated in 1990 with Marilyn Adams' landmark book, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, in which Adams concluded that reading programs that combined systematic phonics instruction with a meaning emphasis seemed to work best of all (Collins, 1997). Hence, the "balanced" or "combination" approach of reading instruction emerged, in which the best strategies from the different theories represented in both whole language and explicit phonic instruction are integrated (Morrow & Tracey, 1997); I personally believe this balanced approach to teaching beginning reading makes good sense. A consistent finding among literature on beginning reading is the relationship between phonemic awareness and beginning reading. Phonemic awareness among prereaders is a powerful predictor of future success in reading and spelling (Snider, 1997). Phonemic awareness can be defined as the conscious awareness that spoken words comprise individual sounds; children learn that phonemes, the smallest units of sound that roughly correspond with individual letters, can be manipulated in a number of ways to interpret or express written language (Snider, 1997). Phonemic awareness forms a bridge that enables naïve readers to translate the squiggles on the page into the spoken language that they already know. Since the relationship between squiggles, sounds and

meaningful language is not obvious to every child, explicit instruction of phonemic awareness should be a part of beginning reading instruction. Other ways of introducing children to letters and sounds include syllabication exercises, such as clapping to the various syllabic intonation patterns of multisyllabic words. In addition to instruction and guidance, children learn to read by reading. They begin to use their knowledge of letter sound relations and context to decode printed words (Gunning, 1996). Beginning readers should be given lots of easy books so that they have many opportunities to practice their developing skills. The easiest reading materials consist of brief, heavily illustrated selections in which sentences are short and uncomplicated and vocabulary consists of easy, high frequency words seen in print (Gunning, 1996). In addition to learning skills, reading requires accumulating vocabulary, concepts, experiences and background knowledge (Gunning, 1996). Since these factors will vary among students, it is important to remember that children will progress at their own pace. Beginning reading instruction should also include activities such as reading aloud to children, shared reading and shared writing, guided reading and guided writing, and readers' and writers' workshops (Bruneau, 1997). I personally believe writer's workshop is essential to any reading program, as per my field observations, students appear to be intrinsically motivated to read their own writing. It is also important that strategies for learning, remembering, solving problems and techniques for carrying out self-directed learning and understanding how our language works are included in reading instruction. Important processing strategies, such as "Searching" and "Self-monitoring" also need to be taught. Searching strategies enable learners to gather cues from an initial attempt to read a text, make multiple tries at difficult words, and self-correct some errors. Self-monitoring strategies enable learners to evaluate their attempts and decide if further searching is needed. These

processing strategies are key in enabling students to cross the bridge from beginning reading to growing independence (Schwartz, 1997).

The stage of "Growing Independence" includes grades 2-3 and marks the beginning of a child's venture into becoming a proficient reader (Gunning, 1996). The main characteristic of this stage is children's evolving fluency. As children practice and realize how to use varying strategies, they gain self-confidence and independent control of the concepts. Teachers can arrange varied opportunities for students to work independently and in collaboration with peers. Literature study circles, an approach in which students independently read children's literature and then discussed the readings in collaboration with peers, have successfully been used to increase reading skills and interest (Samway, 1991). High-progress readers at this stage ask themselves questions like "What is this story about? Did my attempts make sense in this story? Does it look right and make sense? What can I do to solve this problem?" (Schwartz, 1997). As the process of decoding becomes automatic, they are able to concentrate on meaning. Students appear to not be consciously thinking about the letter pattern structure in words as much when reading. Upon observing readers at this stage, I found it easier to notice their letter concept understanding by viewing their writing. As students pass through the primary grades, their reading selections grow in length and complexity. Sentences are also longer and more complex; a wider range of words is used. It is important that each child is given the right level of text. Students do best with reading materials in which no more than 2 to 5 percent of the words are difficult for them (Gunning, 1996). By the end of the third grade, children are encountering thousands of different words in their reading, most of which average third-graders would know if they heard them spoken out loud. A major task is to sound out, or "decode" words that are in students' listening vocabularies but that they may be seeing on a page for a first time (Gunning, 1996). Students' life experiences

enhance reading interest and text meaning. Furthermore, research on good readers indicates that while reading, they connect and relate ideas from their current reading to previous reading experiences; the overall effect of these connected and accumulated readings is that a reader's understanding transcends his or her comprehension of any single passage (Hartman, 1995).

The next stage of reading proficiency development, called "Reading to Learn", includes grades 4-6 (Gunning, 1996). This stage is marked by the wide application of word-attack and comprehension skills, in which greater emphasis is placed on grasping informational text; vocabulary and conceptual load increase significantly (Gunning, 1997). Reading is longer and more complex. Students are required to comprehend numerous concepts in written science and social studies materials as well as to be able to perform complicated sets of directions or form mental maps of concepts (Gunning, 1996). From grades 4 through 6 and beyond, reading material continues to increase in complexity and sophistication. The quantity of informational text also increases. A major task at this stage is to cope with the large numbers of words that are not part of the readers' listening vocabulary (Gunning, 1996).

The last stage used to describe proficient readers is called "Abstract Reading", which includes grades 7 and up (Gunning, 1996). Between the ages of 11 and 14, students enter the stage of formal operations, in which they think abstractly and are able to grasp the underlying organizational principles (Gunning, 1996). They can construct multiple hypotheses, consider several view points, and contemplate logical alternatives. Evaluation of readings become more elaborate and reflect an evolving set of standards for judging (Gunning, 1996). At this point, much of their schooling is conveyed by texts that are longer, more complex, and more abstract. Interest in reading becomes more varied and individualized. Readers at this stage of proficiency employ a complex set of mental strategies that readers need in order to coordinate cues from

different information sources, evaluate their progress, and shift between comprehension and word recognition processes when difficulties arise; this set of "in-the-head" strategies become much more complex than the set of rules and suggestions these proficient readers learned when they were just beginning readers (Schwarz, 1997).

The process of growing from a beginning reader to a proficient reader entails many steps. To say the least, it is a complex process of learning that somehow magically becomes automatic to a proficient reader. I believe the ability to read proficiently is one of the most important assets a person can possess. Reading not only is a necessary skill to survive in our society, but a true gift. My goal as a future teacher is to employ all of the resources available to me in order to pass this precious gift on to all of my students.

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